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The Third Avenue El (December 5, 1996)

When the Third Avenue El was constructed in 1879, the private capitalists even had personal cars attached to bring them to work in style. Those were the days of wooden cars, in an era before electrification. It was only when the subway was constructed in 1904 that electricity was used to power the Third Avenue El. Other phenomena of the early years were special bicycle cars and first-class passenger accommodations at a slightly higher fare. Some readers may remember when freight cars traversed the el with goods and chattel for the Harlem River Yards in the Bronx. Others will recall the “Q” cars that served the 1939 World’s Fair with a variety of modifications.

Every old-timer will have some special memory of the Third Avenue El, and for many, it will be the old coal-fired pot-bellied stoves that provided heat at every station along the route. Even with these stoves and wooden floors and platforms, they never suffered a serious fire. It was a different era. People were accustomed to handling fire safely, and society in general was both more careful and caring. Litter was rare in the stations and on the platforms, and the newspaper vendors below often left cigar boxes on top of the stacks of papers. You simply took a paper and put your money in the box; it was an honor system that tells us something about the people of the day.

The five-cent fare was inaugurated on October 1, 1886 and was not increased until 1948, when it went up to ten cents. Little tokens about the size of a dime made their appearance in 1953 and cost 15 cents; today they are often used in jewelry as a remembrance of a gentler era.

It was in 1886 that the Third Avenue El was extended into the Bronx, when the area was still known as the “Annexed District.” It opened up numerous opportunities for people of the area wishing to work in Manhattan and live in a more countrified section. The population soon exploded, and vacant land became scarce and valuable.

Much controversy surrounds the demolition of the el, which was first razed in Manhattan. Service in the Bronx was at first curtailed, and then on Thursday, May 12, 1955, the last uptown run from Chatham Square to the Bronx commenced at 6 pm with approximately 600 passengers. Despite rallies and impassioned speeches by Mike Quill and other labor leaders and riders, demolition crews entered this fair borough in August to begin the dismantling process.